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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001123

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON'S ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER ON VATICAN TRIP

REF: BEIRUT 1087

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador on 7/25, Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri, just back from Rome, said that he found Vatican officials generally willing to push Christian MPs to participate in the Parliament session to elect Lebanon's next president. But while on board philosophically, they do not yet know how to emphasize that it is a Christian obligation to prevent a vacuum in Lebanon's presidency. Mitri pushed hard for a Papal envoy, despite the known reluctance of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir (who is not even on talking terms with the Holy See, Mitri reported). The Vatican was appalled by Michel Aoun's pronouncements (along the lines of, "if I'm not president, then they'll be no president"). Mitri also detected close coordination between the Vatican and France, in contrast to what he perceived as an absence of genuine cooperation between the Vatican and the USG.

(C) Although satisfied with Vatican thinking on presidential elections, Mitri did not like what he heard regarding Syria. Foreign Minister Mamberti told him that Lebanon "shouldn't ask more from history than history can provide." Mitri felt that the Vatican was skirting uncomfortably close to appeasement in terms of issues such as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. He also said that the Vatican officials, while well informed about Lebanese developments, were less aware of the U.S.-Lebanese dynamic. His contacts speculated that the USG pushed Lebanon into its current confrontation with Syria, when in fact Syria was primarily responsible for the sorry state of Lebanese-Syrian relations. End summary.

IMPRESSED WITH VATICAN'S AWARENESS
OF LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS

¶13. (C) Culture Minister and Acting Foreign Minister Tariq Mitri, having returned to Beirut from Rome a few hours earlier, met with the Ambassador late on 7/25. He said that he met Archbishop Mamberti and Msgr. Franco Coppola (whom Mitri described as "equivalent to your David Welch," although we defer to Embassy Vatican as to the accuracy of comparing the responsibilities and sanctity of the two named officials). Mitri said that Mamberti was largely in listening mode, whereas Coppola, once away from his boss for coffee with Mitri, was much more expansive in describing Vatican thinking toward Lebanon. (Mitri also quoted a couple of statements attributed to Cardinal Bertone, although in

replaying the meeting with Mitri in our heads and reviewing our notes, we believe that Mitri was probably referring to his previous contacts with Bertone rather than new conversations during this trip.) Mitri was impressed by how well informed his Vatican contacts were with Lebanon developments. They understood the issues and the personalities, Mitri marveled, "even though their conclusions were sometimes a bit off."

¶4. (C) Repeating a theme he had mentioned after his last trip to Rome (and noted reftel), Mitri said that he was also struck by the unmistakable dismissive attitude about Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. The Vatican and Sfeir are not even on speaking terms, Mitri said. This complicates the ability of the Vatican to pursue an agenda in Lebanon, since an already suspicious, aging Patriarch will resent any perception of Vatican interference.

VATICAN READY TO HELP WITH ELECTIONS,
BUT UNSURE OF BEST VEHICLE TO DO SO

¶5. (C) In terms of upcoming presidential elections (which should be completed by the end of President Emile Lahoud's term on November 24 to prevent a vacuum and constitutional crisis), Mitri said that the Vatican understood fully the significance of persuading Christian MPs to vote to ensure a quorum and prevent self-marginalization of Lebanon's Christians. "There seems to be a general consensus that the Church needs to help," Mitri noted, citing the Vatican's belief that it is both a civic and Christian responsibility to see that Lebanon's Christian presidency ("the only one in the Middle East," a frequent refrain) is preserved. But the

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Vatican is unclear on what is the mechanism for conveying the Church's views. Mitri said that he pushed very hard for a Papal envoy carrying a Papal letter (such as described reftel). Mitri thought he had made some progress toward that goal.

VATICAN WORRIED LEBANON
WENT TOO FAR IN OPPOSING SYRIA

¶6. (C) While satisfied with the Vatican's thinking on Lebanon's presidential elections, Mitri said that he was less content with Vatican views on Lebanese-Syrian relations. Mamberti said that the Lebanese had scored an enormous victory in April 2005, when Syrian troops departed. That was a once-in-a-lifetime accomplishment akin to the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mamberti explained, and Lebanon "shouldn't ask more from history than history can provide." At another point, Vatican officials described Syria as a "ferocious beast." Since Lebanon cannot kill the beast, and since the beast is stronger than Lebanon, than it is unwise for Lebanon to corner the beast, causing it to lash back in anger. Instead, Lebanon should be pacifying the beast, feeding it as necessary to keep it at bay.

¶7. (C) Mitri said that he felt the Vatican was skirting uncomfortably close to appeasement of Syria. He was particularly worried about their suggestions that Lebanon should roll back its demands regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The Vatican "seems to forget who is the victim and who is the victimizer," Mitri noted, repeating a favorite line from his friend PM Fouad Siniora. "They think we've gone too far."

CONTRASTING CLOSE COOPERATION WITH FRANCE,
WITH MORE DISTANT RELATIONSHIP WITH USG

¶8. (C) Mitri said that he sensed unusually close coordination between the new French administration and the Vatican. French officials, for example, had uttered the word

"Lockerbkie" to Mitri when discussing the Special Tribunal, suggesting that the Sarkozy government in Paris was, like the Vatican, rethinking the Tribunal. By contrast, Mitri said that he found a lack of understanding of the U.S. position surprising. The Vatican officials seemed to conclude that "little Lebanon" would not have taken on the evil beast of Syria without being pushed to do so by the United States. His contacts said that it was misguided for the USG to incite the Lebanese to rebel, when the USG was unable to remove the Syrian threat. The USG has essentially endangered the Lebanese democrats, according to Mitri's version of the Vatican analysis. The Vatican officials expressed deep skepticism about the USG role in Lebanon.

¶9. (C) Mitri said that he had to spend considerable time reminding the Vatican officials that the Lebanese themselves are the ones demanding Lebanon's independence, that they are doing so for Lebanese, not U.S., reasons. The sorry state of the Lebanese-Syrian relationship is due to Syrian action, such as murder and bombs, not because of either Lebanon or the U.S. The Vatican officials also conveyed to Mitri their disappointment "and even resentment" of what they see as the lack of genuine partnership with the United States about Lebanon. USG officials talk but don't listen regarding the subject of Lebanon, Vatican officials complained to Mitri. "You need to be patient with them, cultivate them slowly," Mitri counseled.

VATICAN UNIMPRESSED WITH AOUN

¶10. (C) Asked by the Ambassador whether he had discussed specific presidential candidates with the Vatican, Mitri said that the Vatican officials were favorably impressed with recent visits by former MP Nassib Lahoud and Minister of Justice Charles Rizk. The Vatican seeks a presidential candidate who can rise above petty (but deadly) Lebanese politics, and Rizk and Lahoud came across as promising. As for Michel Aoun, "they thought he was crazy," Mitri giggled. The Vatican officials were appalled by Aoun's statements threatening that, if he did not become president, then there will be no Lebanese president. "In that," Mitri said, "the Vatican is different from the French," whom Mitri believes are currently flirting with Aoun.

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